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Sen. Smith's CIA Lookout Job Position Of Honor, Trust

By DONALD R. LARRABEE
WASHINGTON — Sen. Margaret Chase Smith (R-Me.) is a woman who can keep a secret. She is one of a handful of senators in whom matters of the highest security classification are now confided on a regular basis. It is at once an honor and a fearsome trust.

By virtue of her senior position on the Armed Services and Defense Appropriations Committees, the Lady from Maine has advanced to a true inner circle of the Senate which serves as the only watchdog of the super-secret Central Intelligence Agency. Sen. Leavett Saltonstall (R-Mass.) is another member of the "silent six" and no one has ever accused him of being a blabbermouth, either. Saltonstall is retiring this year.

SOME MEMBERS of Congress resent the CIA's singular status. Its spending programs don't have to be justified in detail and, unlike other executive agencies, its books are not open to general inspection by appropriations committees. As yet, no better system has been devised or agreed upon than to place the responsibility for oversight in the hands of a few who command the respect and confidence of their colleagues.

As part of her new burden, Senator Smith slipped out of Washington quietly on a recent weekend to inspecting existing and proposed military and space activities in the Atlantic and

Caribbean areas. There was no public announcement until she was almost ready to return. The trip itself is no secret but the senator thinks it's better to keep still about what she saw and heard, at least for the moment.

BOTH IN her military committee assignments and as ranking Republican on the Senate Aeronautical and Space Committee, Sen. Smith is flooded with facts and figures. One day, officials come to her office and she is given highly confidential information. The next day, testimony touching all around the same subject might be delivered in an open committee session.

She admits that it's no small problem to keep in mind what has been told to her of a "classified" nature and what she is at liberty to mention to others. A special problem arises at this time of year when officials like Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and the Pentagon's top brass testify behind closed doors on details of the military budget.

SUCH TESTIMONY, dealing as it does with Viet Nam mostly and our war strategy, contains many off-the-record and classified comments which are deleted by Pentagon censors before the transcript is published. But senators, like Mrs. Smith and Saltonstall, reading the printed version, must live

with the sensitive information that has been withheld from the general public.

Sen. Smith and Sen. John Pastore (D-R. I.), at last month's executive session with Secretary McNamara, apparently were told something about our contingency plans for using tactical nuclear weapons in Viet Nam. Sen. Smith asked the cabinet official to explain under what conditions these weapons would be used in Viet Nam. McNamara's carefully worded reply disavowed any plan or need for using nuclear weapons in the field but the secretary reportedly changed "Viet Nam" in the senator's questions to "South Viet Nam" in his reply.

How about North Viet Nam? asked Sen. Pastore. McNamara stated: "It is not our intention to carry on military operations in North Viet Nam that would require the use or make desirable the use of nuclear weapons . . . (the rest of his answer was deleted.)"

AT ANOTHER point in the testimony, Pastore asked: "Why aren't we asking Germany to make a contribution in Viet Nam?" McNamara's reply was deleted and so was Pastore's comment on the reply. Any good

espionage agent could probably draw some reasonable conclusions based on what was deliberately deleted.

Sen. Smith does not question the necessity to conceal facts relating to military plans and movements and our war strategy. She does think, however, that a lection-happy censor can sometimes do more harm than good. The obvious holes in the testimony can speak more loudly than what appears in print, she suggests.

Many members of Congress have said privately for some months that they have either been kept too much in the dark on Viet Nam or restricted too broadly in what they can say. This frustration seems to be reflected in much of the critical mail reaching the Capitol which, more than anything, tends to question what we are doing in Viet Nam in the first place.

The "information gap" seems to be as worrisome to McNamara, as it is to the Smiths and Saltonstalls. In a colloquy with the defense chief, Saltonstall spoke pointedly of the right of Congress to be informed. Said McNamara: "Certainly you are entitled to know. But the problem is how do we tell you."